

1926: The social general strike - why 1926 failed - Tom Brown



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This text also contains an introduction, footnotes and postscript by a US-based group "More to Come" which they used in a pamphlet "Why strikes fail???". We have placed them at the end of Brown's article, which we feel historically is more important.

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THE SOCIAL GENERAL STRIKE

Why 1926 Failed

By Tom Brown

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Why did the British General Strike of 1926 fail? Not because the workers failed to strike. The number of blacklegs was insignificant. The attempt of the middle-class to scab on the strikers was a poor effort and was rapidly breaking down the machines used. About one per cent. of normal train services were running, but only nine days of that caused chaos on the railways for months afterwards. The breakdown was greater than that caused by the air raids on London in 1940-41 and took much longer to repair. The University students and other middle-class scabs could not replace the transport workers and certainly did not intend to replace the miners.



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Nor did the strike fail because of a fall in the morale of the workers. The Aggregate of strikers was much greater on the last day of the strike than on the first and the fighting spirit was much tougher.

The Collapse of Leadership

The strike failed only because it was called off by the trade union leaders and the workers had not learned to distrust those leaders sufficiently. Worse still, the most important divisions of strikers were organised in trade unions and they were used to obeying instructions from the officials of those unions. The strike was betrayed by the leadership.

But do not let us fall into the error of believing that the leaders called off the strike because of their own cowardice. The Labour leaders economic interests are those of capitalism and in betraying the strike they were defending the economic interest. The trade union leaders never believed in the strike and only led it in order to prevent it being controlled by the workers; they led it in order to ensure its failure. Scores of quotations from the leaders of the Trades Union Congress could be produced to prove this. We have room for but one.

"No General Strike was ever planned or seriously planned as an act of Trade Union policy. I told my own union in April, that such a strike would be a national disaster."

"We were against the stoppage, not in favour of it." J.R. CLYNES; Memoirs.

True, the workers were rapidly developing an alternative to the leader principle. The Councils of Action were improvised bodies born of local initiative. Even

more significant was the spontaneous and widespread creation of mass picket lines and their unqualified success. But in spite of such a hopeful development the strikers still had the habit of obedience to leaders. It was not, of course, the leaders alone who were defending their capitalist interest inside the Labour movement. The trade unions were not only, through their vast invested funds, shareholders in capitalism-they were part of the social order; as much capitalist institutions as the workhouse or the Houses of Parliament.

To wage a successful General Strike the workers must reject, not only certain leaders, but the leader principle, using to the full their own initiative. They must organise, not in trade unions, but in syndicalist or revolutionary industrial unions (in Britain the two terms mean the same), and they must change their strategy from that of the General Walk Out Strike to that of the General Stay In Strike.

Stay in Striker

Consider what happens in an orthodox strike, general or particular. The strikers, who had the means of production in their hands one day, on the next hand them over to their class-enemies in a nice tidy working condition and go home. The railmen and bus and lorry drivers hand over the vital means of transport, without which modern capitalism and the State cannot exist. The electrical engineers hand over the power stations; the gas workers the gas producers; Dockers, warehousemen and food factory workers surrender millions of tons of precious flour, bacon, meat, butter, rice and fruit. Engineers vacate arsenals which might be used to arm Fascists. Then they go home to sit by grates which gradually become fireless or at tables with a lessening loaf or go out on to the streets to be battered upon their defenceless heads.

How much better to stay at work and do your striking there. Naturally, to many workers this will seem a strange idea, they are used to striking by leaving the job, not by staying on it, least of all to continuing at work and striking at the same time. But stay awhile, all fruitful ideas must have sounded startling at first hearing, as startling as the first steam-locomotive to a stage coachman.

Look at it this way. We all depend for our very living upon the machines and those who tend them, the employer even more than we. Not only does he depend upon servants to clean his home and cook his meals, to wash him and dress him and to do everything but chew his food for him, he also far more than we ever shall upon complicated mechanisms, telephones, electric fires, automobiles and

so on. There he is vulnerable. Even more vulnerable is his industrial and commercial system and his political institutions.

And behind the machine is a man; he has not yet achieved his dream of Kossum's Universal Robots.

That man is the striker-all things are in his hands. Industry is in the workers' hands. They control the trains, the ships and the buses. They run the telephone exchanges and the power stations. They warehouse and prepare the food, clothing, shoes and myriad commodities which make life possible.

In the Social General Strike the workers decide to cut off these supplies from the employing class and to supply them in full-for the first time in history-to the working class.

Instead of starving, we eat as we have never feasted before, instead of being clubbed, shot and imprisoned we retain the means of defending our lives.

The employing class will be without petrol, heat, electricity, communication or servant. Such a General Strike has been often called The General Lock Out of the Capitalist Class. Perhaps that is a more appropriate term.

To accomplish such an end, however, the workers must shed the old, outworn methods of trade unionism and adopt those of the Syndicalists and Revolutionary Industrial Unionists. Instead of organising in the branch room of the local Labour Club or the tap room of the " Bed Lion " we must organise on the job; the miners in the pits, the engineers in the factories, the seamen on the ships.

Only by organising on the job are we preparing to take over industry. By organising in the trade union local branch we are fitting ourselves for nothing greater than taking over the local dart team.

Let us now consider in greater detail the mode of organisation advocated by Syndicalists for the defence of our class and the taking and holding of industry.

Taking Over

The basis of trade union organisation, as well as its growth and practice, make it unsuited, even dangerous to the taking and running of industry. Trade unions are

of three types, trade unions proper, that is craft unions, bastard forms of "industrial unions" and general mass unions.

Craft unions may have been justified in the days of handicraft production when a craftsman produced, almost entirely alone, the commodity of his trade. Today, however, by the development of technics and the subdivision of labour many crafts and occupations are necessary to the production of even a simple commodity. If we walk into an engineering factory, for instance, we find the workers already organised by the capitalist. The patternmakers work in harmony with the moulders who pass their work to the machinists. The machinists' work is dovetailed into that of the fitters. Maybe blacksmiths, plumbers, coppersmiths, joiners, sheetmetal workers, boilermakers and

painters join in the production of this one commodity. Clerks, time-keepers, inspectors and draughtsmen too, are necessary to industrial process.

Yet, while all may be under one roof, producing one-type of commodity, say locomotives, these workers may be "organised" into forty unions. Disorganised would be a more apt word. To ask a Syndicalist, "do you believe in trade unionism" is like asking a man if he believes in the penny-farthing bicycle.

However, not all of our engineering workers will be members of craft unions, some will be members of an alleged industrial union, the Amalgamated Engineering Union. The A.E.U. is not a true industrial union for it is organised on the basis of craft not industry, though the craft is given a wider meaning than that of the accepted craft unions. Thus the A.E.U. claims members among marine workers aboard ship, in the chemical industry and scores of other industries and for twenty years has had uneasy relations with the Miners' Federation over its attempts to organise coalmining workers. In any case, the A.E.U. is not organised on the basis of industry, but upon the basis of residence. That is, if you work in East London and live in West London you will, generally be organised, not where you work, but where your bed is.

Redundant Unionism

Besides the craft and pseudo-industrial unions some of the workers will be organised in at least two

"general workers unions", such as the Transport and General or the Municipal and General. These are general unions which "organise" anybody and everybody,

engineers, miners, dockers, busmen, shop assistants, clerks or farm labourers. Anybody and everybody in a vast, amorphous disorderly mass.

None of these three types of unionism meets the needs of labour in the modern age. "What is needed is a union which will organise the workers of one factory in a single industrial union-craftsmen, labourers, clerks, storekeepers and draughtsmen-male and female-young and old. An industrial union not split into residential areas, but organised on the job, built up inside of the factory.

The organisational plan of revolutionary industrial unionism allows, of course, for complete organisational relations with other factories in the industry. Industrial unions are organised in each industry and service, mining, textiles, rail, education, building, health and so on. All industrial unions are federated into One Big Union. It is intended that the One Big Union shall be a world-wide union of all workers with autonomous administrations in each country.

We have here a plan of union organisation which is capable of running successfully a Social General Strike, of taking and holding industry and locking out the employing class. Not for the General Strike alone must we organise scientifically-the everyday needs of the workers cry aloud for an efficient union movement to protect their wage packets. During these wage struggles and the smaller disputes and tussles which take place daily on the job, the revolutionary unionists are all the time studying their jobs, the technics and organisation of industry. When the occasion to strike occurs they are thus fitted to take and hold the undertaking.

How would the Social General Strike method be applied? On the morning of the strike the revolutionary unionists no longer obey the foremen and managers, each person or gang take over

their own job. Where liaison, delegates or committees, are needed such have already been organised.

Who'll Pay the Wages?

Who will pay the wages? No one. Money, the most powerful weapon of the capitalist is discarded.

The banknotes in his wallet are so much fluff. But we must eat to live. Very well, the canning factories, the docks and warehouses are already in the hands of the

workers. The flour mills and bakehouses, the dairies and packing houses are controlled by them. The dockers, railwaymen and lorry drivers deliver the food to the factories and working class districts, the shop assistants and canteen workers supply it to the workers and their families.

Distribution will not be according to the amount of money a person has but according to his need.

Large families will receive more than small families or single persons. Children will have first call on milk and sweets. Delicacies such as poultry and grapes will go to the hospitals and invalids instead of to wealthy overfed idlers. Farm labourers and smallholders send food to the cities.

Miners will continue to send coal to the surface, and the railwaymen's industrial union will deliver it to the factories, gasworks, power stations and distribution centres. Power station workers organised in their syndicate will produce electricity and distribute it to the workers' houses, factories and transport undertakings.

Necessary communication among related industrial plants will be the responsibility of the telephone and other post office workers.

Distribution

Stores of clothing held by textile mills and shops will be distributed to the most needy by the Textile and Distributive Syndicates. Hospital and other health service workers will continue their work through their unions. Water and other municipal services will be carried on by the Municipal Workers' Industrial Union.

Newspaper compositors and machinists will refuse any longer to print the lies and provocations of the employing class, as they refused on the eve of the 1926 General Strike in Britain. But instead of walking out of the print shops they remain at work and turn the newspapers into organs of the General Strike.

At a glance, any worker can see the obvious advantage of such a strike weapon and its great superiority over the old strike method of starving for three to six months. Superior because we eat instead of starving, but the Syndicalist method is effective not only because of the strikers seizure of the commissariat for the strikers, it also uses the boycott against the employing class.

All domestic and personal servants who were members of their union would leave their employment. Employers would be forced to cook, make beds, do shopping and run their own errands. Postal workers would cease all communications with bourgeois districts. No buses, trains, trams or lorries would pass through these areas or touch buildings where blacklegs were employed, housed or fed.

No food or drink would be delivered to these places. The municipal workers would strike against sweeping their streets or emptying their dust-bins. Gas, water and electricity would cease to flow to

them. The weapons of starvation and deprivation which the capitalists have so often used against the workers will be used against them.

It is obvious that faced with such a situation the employing class will offer anything, a shorter working day, higher wages, holidays with pay, as the French capitalist class did when confronted by the stay-in strikes of the workers of France in 1936. Anything to get back their control of industry.

The greatest mistake the French workers ever made was to hand back to their employers the industries and services they held so successfully. Once having taken control of industry class-conscious industrially organised workers would continue to hold that industry, establishing the principles of common ownership and workers' control of industry, abolishing capitalism and the wages system and distributing the good things of life, each according to his needs.

Stay In Strikes in Europe

The engineering workers of Italy successfully seized the factories in 1920. During the occupation they were fed by the Peasants' Syndicates, co-operatives, distributive workers and railwaymen. After four weeks occupation they returned the factories to the capitalists in return for a shorter working day, a wage increase and several minor concessions; within two-years of the return of the factories the workers of Italy were defeated by Fascism.

The workers of France in 1936 took possession of factories and many other undertakings in one of the most successful strikes ever known. Unfortunately, they returned them to the employing class in return for holidays with pay, wage increases and a shorter working day. Almost, at once the Popular Front government put in power just after the strike by Communist, Socialist and

Liberal votes began the piece-meal reconquest of the gains made by the strikers.

Syndicalists have always taught that it is not sufficient to practice the stay-in-strike for wage concessions, but that it is necessary to take and hold the means of production as the Spanish Syndicalist workers did in 1936. By holding the factories, mines, railways and all means of production and distribution the workers established the principle of "Workers' Control of Industry". Each factory is run by the workers of that factory assembled in meeting and by the delegates elected by them, such delegates to be subject to instant recall by the people who elected them should they not fulfil their duties. Each factory or group of workshops is, in the same way represented on the district council of its industry. Each district is represented on the national council of the industry. All industries and services are federated to a National Council of Labour integrating the whole social economy of the country, distributing work and materials, cutting out waste, preparing statistics and assessing distribution.

By this means the social economy is integrated without centralisation, that clumsy red-tape bound machine of the bureaucrat. By having the affairs of an Industry controlled by the persons working in that industry, by district affairs being controlled by the district and factory affairs by the workers in That factory; by control from below instead of from above and by exercising the principle of election and recall federalism, instead of centralism, becomes the principle of the new society.

Do We Need Foremen?

Some say to us. "But, you will still need foremen." We do not agree. A workman who knows his job does not need a foreman-a workman who does not know his job needs the advice and help of his

mates. In any case a foreman is rarely appointed because of his superior knowledge or gift of leadership. Marriage, membership of certain clubs, drinking, fawning and bluff, all may open the door to promotion. However if "foremen" were necessary under Workers' Control, we do not pretend to be able to forecast every detail of the new society, but this we do know, any "foreman"

or such person would be appointed by the men and be subject to their recall.

Here we see a new principle at work-control from below. At present, and in a State Socialist society, all promotion is from above downwards. We see what the

latter means at out work. If a foreman of mediocre ability is about to promote some one from the bench to the chargehand's desk and he spots a worker of outstanding ability who would make a much better foreman than he, does he promote that worker? Hardly! To do so would be to prepare his own downfall, certainly to endanger his own job, so he usually promotes somebody who will not be a serious rival. So it goes on, right up to the top- selection by mediocrity! The worker is usually able to recognise a fellow worker's outstanding skill and acknowledge it. The workers would have no social or economic motive in keeping a good man down, instead, it would be in their interest to nominate him to more responsible work.

Having said that, under the principle of social ownership, the miners would control the mines and engineers the metal working factories, we are often asked, " But who would run the hospitals and who would look after municipal services such as water supply? Of course, hospitals would be run by the hospital workers, all of them, organised in the Health Workers' Syndicate. Municipal services, such as water supply and street cleansing, would be the responsibility of the Municipal Workers'

Syndicate. Similarly, education would be the work of those who had spent, their lives studying and practising the art of pedagogy. Of course, the workers of these three syndicates would work in co-operation with the patients, house-dwellers, scholars and parents respectively.

Here is a system of industrial democracy, the only true democracy, not the choice of choosing Tweedledum or Tweedledee every five, eight or ten years and being controlled by him and his partners for the period between, but the control of one's own job and environment, the control of one's own life. The government of men by men gives way to the administration of things.

As to distribution, the Syndicalist method of distribution is free; a system of common ownership and Workers' Control must have a system of free and common distribution to supplement, it. That is, all the good things of life will be produced in plentiful supply and distributed by the distributive, municipal and transport workers to whoever needs them, as much as he needs them. Just as now a person may borrow from the public library as many books as he needs, so he will be allowed as much food as he can eat without payment. Once one had to pay to cross bridges, enter parks and even walk along roads, now we may do that freely. So in a Syndicalist society cinemas and theatres will be us free as

museums or parks: railways, trams and postage will be as free of charge as roads and bridges are now.

Some will say that the greedy will eat too much if there is enough for all. Well, water is probably the most precious of commodities, in use value that is, but any one will give a thirsty stranger a glass of water-a pailful if he can drink it. No one worries about some one drinking more than his share of water. Certainly no one hoards pails of water in miserly style, for water being freely to hand, appeals not to the miser or glutton. If bread were as plentiful as water, who would eat more than his share?

Power to the Workers

"But you would still have criminals and hooligans." Yes, we would still be pestered for a few years by these dregs of capitalist society, and the workers would know how to protect their new-won society from these miserable misfits and from counter-revolutionists and Fascists. The workers' syndicates would establish Workers' Militias as did the Spanish workers in 1936, workers patrols and whatever other means of workers' defence were necessary, if needful, the syndicates would arm their militias.

But that would not be state power-politics, for the state is the special force of public repression used by the ruling class, old or new, against its subjects the people. The armed syndicates would be a general force-a people in arms. After a while it would be unnecessary for workers to carry arms and these would gradually be laid away, as people during the late war laid aside their gas masks when they discovered that no gas attack was likely. Full freedom would be born and develop naturally and in its own time.

How different when the Revolution gives birth to a new state as in France in 1789 and Russia in 1917. In Russia for example, power came into the hands of the Bolshevik Party, who used it to disarm the workers and build a regular army, police force, secret political police and use spies, gaolers and judges to maintain their political power. In a political revolution power is in the hands of a ruling party. In a social revolution power is in the hands of the workers. If the workers allow themselves to be disarmed by a new government then counter-revolution succeeds.

The Syndicalist Social General Strike then aims at the conquest of the means of

production by the workers. We are now poor and enslaved not because of lack of reforms made by politicians, but because the employing class own and control the means of production, without access to which we cannot live. So long as others control the means whereby we live so long shall we be slaves. Only by taking and holding the means of distribution can the workers be free.

Printed by C. A. Brock & Co. Ltd., (T.U.) 78 Southern Row, London, W.10.

WHY STRIKES FAIL???

Introduction

By More to Come

This pamphlet has been stimulated by the recent strikes in the Bay Area, especially the city workers'

strike of Spring '76. The workers have lost even when there has been unusual solidarity. There must be a reason for this. There must be a way out of this display of labours' misery.

The Social General Strike by Tom Brown was written in the early 40s. It is a revolutionary-syndicalist approach to the solution of how to win a strike. He presents a radical departure from the controlled and manipulated strike actions of today.

The 8 hour day was fought for and won in the 1880s for many workers. Today we are still defending the 8 hour day. We may have medical insurance, but we have to buy our medical care in a system run for profit, not health. We may have retirement plans, but they are used for investment schemes that fill up the already gold-lined pockets of the rich. Workers are forced off jobs due to injury, firing or just plain boredom. Many retirement funds collapse due to mismanagement or don't provide enough to live on even if you can stick it out. Wage raises are eaten up by inflation, interest and taxes.

The bosses continue to rip us off and pay us back in wages only a tiny amount of the wealth we create. Our boredom and longing are promoted into personal solutions and consumer products. But even that is not enough so we, ourselves, are consumed by the state in endless war.

In 1911 William Trautman of the IWW wrote a pamphlet called "Why Strikes Are Lost?" which has been reprinted in Rebel Voices: An IWW Anthology. In that article he shows through examples including San Francisco¹ that the main function of the unions is to bring a docile disciplined workforce to the job. And he outlines ways in which this is accomplished. Almost 70 years later it is still true and could have been written about the recent strikes here. Over and over the solidarity of the rank and file is subverted. Union members are treated as privates in an army designed to fail from the very outset.

Trautman stresses two main methods which the boss-union-state bureaucratic team work to our disadvantage. The first is craft autonomy. Craft autonomy is a term used to lay down rules for each labour organisation which allow only a certain portion of workers in an industry to become members of a given union. Each craft then guards its own interest and swears off interference in the affairs of any other union. So at any one workplace there may be many unions, the workers begin divided and weak, allowing no concerted action during times of conflict.

The second weapon against a united workforce is the sacredness of contracts. Unions settle for contracts that expire at different times in the same workplace. Also different shops in related industry will have different contracts. So while some fight for survival on the pavement, others stand by idly-frozen by union rules. The labour activity that is allowed under contracts is limited to striking at specified times. Employers use this to their benefit by forcing strikes as a money saving device. For example, the past two San Francisco municipal strikes have saved the city more money than it paid in increased wages and benefits. Owners and public officials force the workers to strike when the warehouses are full or demand is low. The timetable for labour activity is set by contracts and bosses, not labour.

Work actions like the one day strike, Christmas strike, rulebook slowdown, sit-down, sabotage and other such actions that would hurt the employers and not the workers are rarely advocated. If someone advocates a direct job action s/he is usually suspended from the union or fired. If not, the union is taken over by the international union bureaucracy. And too, while we strike we are unable to make demands that satisfy our real community needs. For instance health workers don't strike for better medical care for patients and auto workers don't strike for safe, efficient cars.

Trautman contends that the deliberate loosening strategy promoted by the labour fakers decreases our faith in the ability of our own class to liberate ourselves and build a better world. We see in our city and our world people under the domination of one or another ruling clique-whatever they call themselves. Our very social fabric is being unravelled from among us. Fear, despair and alienation engulf us. We need an overall transformation of social life- not just strikes or labour organisation.

Our present consumerist madness does not soothe or placate us. We don't need to control work as it is, but rather we need to redefine work. We don't need to have community control under government guidelines, but rather the creation of a satisfying community life without restraints....

the merging of love and work, desire and need. We must build a strong loom while weaving the cloth anew.

Postscript

Brown's article leaves off with the impression that the Spanish workers were successful in carrying the general strike on to eventual social revolution. Unfortunately they didn't, since those who are last to leave the battlefield, write the history, few know about the Spanish Civil War let alone the Spanish councils, which evolved out of the Spanish experiments with the general strike.

Nevertheless we can say this about it, the Spanish general strike tactics succeeded in 1936 to enable more than the 2 million workers under the CNT-FAI banner to seize power over their lives in response to the fascist coup. The CNT-FAI 'union' structure quickly transcended into a local democratic unit (the council) and a regional network on syndicalist lines of form. The general strike brought to life the concepts of mutual aid and solidarity that prepared the way for the implementation of social revolution. The expropriation of land, businesses, factories and dwellings forced the people to create new forms which went beyond what the CNT had previously organised or envisioned.

The creation of a libertarian economy resulted, without money or property as alienating forces.

Spain was viciously attacked by forces of international Fascism (Hitler-Mussolini-Franco). The leadership of the CNT-FAI and thousands of other anarchists undermined and halted the social revolution which was, in fact, their

greatest weapon against fascism. Instead they joined the government and supported the war.

Elsewhere the general strike has failed to win anything but transitory reforms and the workers have eventually been divided up successfully by the capitalists to prevent further wins. Exceptions to this have been isolated by new technology and fought losing battles against reactionary unions. An example of this is the West Coast Longshoremen's Union which has traded increased benefits for fewer jobs. Finally, two recent examples of widespread general strike tactics have resulted in substantial disruptions of national economies and near social revolutions. In Hungary in 1956 the first occurred. Led initially by students and intellectuals and focused at the imperialist role of the USSR in Eastern Europe, a major rising of the people swept the country and converted its army and some Russian units. The general strike turned to social revolution when production returned on the basis of national and local needs. However, it was crushed by international action of the USSR and resistance evaporated when people left the country in escape to the West. The councils had not existed long enough in theory or practice for the people to carry on rebellion.

The other example is Chile in 1971-73, here the councils achieved significant and widespread development. Some councilists threw in with Allende's government while others were confused by on and off support by political parties like MIR. Finally they were disarmed and crushed first by the Allende regime and then the rightist reaction. Unable to move independently and weakened they were crushed along with the left before embarking on social revolution.

It is clear to us that the general strike must be taken out of the hands of the trade unions and parties.

Footnotes

1. In the first SF street car workers strike all were organised into a single union. The strike was spontaneous and successful as far as it went. Soon after the strike the labour bureaucrats began dividing the workers. Electricians and linemen were forced into the International Brotherhood of

Electrical Workers; engineers to the Intern. Union of Steam Engineers; likewise machinists, firemen, oilers had to join the union of their craft. The second strike

occurred in 1907 and was an absolute failure. No one could strike together so were too weak to win. This scenario was repeated among Philadelphia Street care workers with a successful strike in 1909 and then defeat in 1910 when forced to go out by the company after they were divided.

2. In fact, the ruling elite may or may not be hurt personally by a general strike. But this is not the point today. The social general strike builds for social revolution and the workers benefit directly during it. Whereas in traditional trade union actions the workers suffer. Contrast this: if the MUNI had done a fare box strike (not collecting fares) giving us free rides as opposed to the trade union tactic of withholding service

This pamphlet was prepared by MORE TO COME, a small group from the bay area. You can contact us with your comments, criticisms, questions or points of view at: Digitised by Richard Alexander, and taken from <http://myweb.tiscali.co.uk/blackchip/> >his homepage. Slightly edited by libcom

Richard Alexander's notes: I have corrected some of the spelling mistakes found in the publication, but doubtless new ones have been introduced during the process of OCR'ing the text and editing it in Word. The illustrations that accompanied the US edition have been ignored. NB the Tom Brown text can also be found in the Phoenix Press edition "Tom Brown's Syndicalism", published in 1990.